



Christmas Tree...

History of Christmas tree rooted in Christian legend

By Chuck Lovejoy

Of The Battalion Staff

The Christmas tree, perhaps the most beloved of Christmas traditions, is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of peace and human kindness.

Although Christmas trees now often are used to commercialize the holiday season, the Christmas tree originated as a representation of the peace and good will the holiday season brings.

As with any long-recognized tradition, several legends surround the origin of the Christmas tree.

One 18th-century legend credits St. Boniface with starting the tradition.

In "The Book of Religious Holidays and Celebrations," Marguerite Ickis describes how St. Boniface "persuaded the Teutons to give up their cruel practice of sacrificing a child before a great oak tree during their midwinter festival."

According to the book, Boniface told the Teutons instead to cut down a fir tree, take it home and celebrate around it with their children. He chose the fir tree because it was regarded as a symbol of immortality: "Its leaves were ever green and its top branches pointed straight to the heavens."

Another legend of the origin of the Christmas tree is connected with St. Winfred, an 8th-century missionary who served in Scandinavia.

Ickis' book tells the tale of how Winfred cut down a large oak tree, only to see a young evergreen tree "miraculously spring up in its place."

Winfred declared the tree holy and directed the chieftan of the area to take the tree into his hall and rejoice on the night of Jesus' birth.

In "The Christmas Tree," Daniel J. Foley says folklorists have associated the origins of the Christmas tree with the German and Scandinavian

practice of bringing an evergreen indoors during the winter months "to dispel the gloom of the long, dark cold days of winter."

Yule trees, as they are called, are not decorated like Christmas trees, serving a purpose closer to that of houseplants. Yule trees still stand beside Christmas trees in many European households.

The real beginnings of the Christmas tree as we know it today seem to lie partly in the miracle plays of the Middle Ages, which told biblical stories, especially the story of Christ's life.

These plays were performed without costumes or sets. One particular play performed near Christmas was called the Paradise play. It told the story of Adam and Eve and used a single prop — an evergreen tree on which apples were hung, representing the Garden of Eden.

The paradise tree, as it was called, endured long after the miracle plays were banished in the late 1400s. Foley writes that the trees were the subject of many religious paintings and were included in children's stories of Adam and Eve's fall from grace.

Parents also began to decorate the trees with communion-type wafers, which later were replaced with pastries, cookies and other confections of various shapes and colors.

Another ancestor of the Christmas tree of today is the German *Lichtstock* and the Italian *ceppo*, a pyramid-shaped set of shelves decorated with tinsel and candles. Nativity scenes, religious figurines and other heirlooms suited to the occasion of Christmas also were placed upon the shelves.

The shelves varied in shape from triangular to octagonal. Some were mechanically rotated so all sides of the lighted pyramid could be displayed.

How the paradise tree and the *Lichtstock* came to be combined is not known precisely, but it was common in



Germany to display the two side by side during the Christmas season.

Eventually, the two were incorporated into a close version of the modern Christmas tree. The pyramid's crowning star was placed atop the paradise tree, the nativity scenes were set below and the tinsel and baubles were draped across the evergreen's branches.

The lights of the Christmas tree are entirely another matter. Even though each *Lichtstock* shelf generally displayed several candles, the practice did not spread to the paradise tree.

Ickis tells a popular story about German theologian Mar-

tin Luther, who is credited with first adding candles to the Christmas tree.

While walking home one night shortly before Christmas, Luther noticed the stars shining through the branches of the evergreen trees in the forest. He was so moved by the sight that when he arrived home, he cut a fir tree and placed candles on its branches to show his children what he had seen.

The principally German practice of decorating a Christmas tree spread rapidly through Europe.

Christmas trees never really caught on in England, however, until 1848. That

Christmas, the *Illustrated London News* published an etching of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria and the royal family celebrating around a Christmas tree, and the tradition took off.

Never mind that the royal family had decorated Christmas trees since 1841, after the birth of Albert and Victoria's first son. Foley writes, "The fact that a new fashion had a royal flourish gave it the prestige so necessary in those days to its success and popularity."

The same reaction to the etching occurred in the United States, when it was printed in Godey's "Lady's Book" in

1850. German immigrants in the United States had been putting up Christmas trees since the early 1800s, but the etching of British royalty made the practice an instant tradition (possibly because many Americans still felt a connection to their mother England).

Since then, the Christmas tree has continued to evolve.

Now, department stores display modern Christmas trees with colored electrical lights, aluminum tinsel and even motorized bases that rotate the tree to the tune of electronically-produced Christmas songs.

And Martin Luther still used candles.

